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#### ***published in***

Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies  
2000

#### ***DOI (link to publisher)***

[10.1080/713680504](https://doi.org/10.1080/713680504)

#### ***document version***

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication in VU Research Portal](#)

#### ***citation for published version (APA)***

de Witte, H., & Klandermans, P. G. (2000). Political racism in Flanders and the Netherlands: explaining differences in the electoral success of extreme right-wing parties. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 26, 699-717. <https://doi.org/10.1080/713680504>

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Publisher Routledge

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## Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713433350>

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Online publication date: 04 August 2010

**To cite this Article** De Witte, Hans and Klandermans, Bert(2000) 'Political racism in Flanders and the Netherlands: Explaining differences in the electoral success of extreme right-wing parties', Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, 26: 4, 699 – 717

**To link to this Article:** DOI: 10.1080/713680504

**URL:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/713680504>

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## Political racism in Flanders and the Netherlands: explaining differences in the electoral success of extreme right-wing parties

Hans De Witte and Bert Klandermans

**Abstract** *In this article, a multi-disciplinary approach is used to explain the electoral breakthrough of the Vlaams Blok in Flanders (Belgium) relative to the marginal electoral performance of the extreme right in the Netherlands. Drawing on insights from various disciplines – mainly historical science, political science, sociology and social psychology, a conceptual frame is developed to explain this difference. Three factors are highlighted: supply, demand, and mobilisation. In terms of supply, an extreme right-wing party needs a 'strong' structure in order to grow. A 'fertile soil' is also needed ('demand'). This means that a large enough number of citizens must hold attitudes that make them susceptible to the message of an extreme right-wing party. Demand will mostly be guided by negative attitudes towards foreigners and (to a lesser degree) by a negative attitude towards politics. Interaction of supply and demand in the context of mobilisation can lead to an 'upward spiral'. A stronger structure implies greater means and more human resources to convince the 'reservoir' of voters. When societal circumstances allow, this can lead to an electoral breakthrough, which in turn further strengthens the structure of the party, its means to communicate with potential voters and its opportunities for placing topics on the political agenda. In this article, we will demonstrate that supply and demand are stronger in Flanders than in the Netherlands. Right-wing extremism in Flanders experienced an upward spiral, whereas in the Netherlands it remained caught in a web of organisational weakness.*

KEYWORDS: RACISM; RIGHT-WING EXTREMISM; BELGIUM; THE NETHERLANDS

The Netherlands and Belgium have a partly shared history, with both countries hitherto belonging to what was called 'the Low Countries' (Kossman 1978). The Netherlands shares a common language with the Flemish part of Belgium (Flanders). The political landscape and social structure of Belgium and the Netherlands also show important analogies. There are three main political 'families' in both countries (Christian democracy, liberalism and socialism), and their societies have likewise been structured on the basis of these philosophies ('pillarisation'). Belgium and the Netherlands were also both occupied by Nazi Germany during the Second World War. The two countries therefore lend themselves well to a comparison of the respective electoral strength of political racism, i.e. extreme right-wing parties.

A previous exploratory study of the 'Centrumstroming' in the Netherlands and the Vlaams Blok (Flemish Block) in Flanders concluded that the phenomenon of political racism in the two countries did not appear to differ significantly (De Witte and Scheepers 1996). Both the Vlaams Blok and the Centrum

Democraten (CD) or the then Centrum Partij '86 (CP '86) can be regarded as extreme right-wing parties, both on account of their ideology (Mudde 1998) and their structural links with earlier extreme right-wing parties and organisations (compare Gijssels 1992 and Spruyt 1995 with van Donselaar 1991). The electoral profile of these parties was also quite similar in terms of background characteristics and attitudes (compare Billiet and De Witte 1995 with Scheepers et al. 1993). Despite these similarities, there are considerable differences in the electoral success enjoyed by the parties in the two countries. Although electoral support for the Vlaams Blok was virtually insignificant during the early 1980s, in November 1991 the party succeeded in gaining 10.6 per cent of the Flemish vote (for a summary, see De Witte and Scheepers 1997). This score increased to 12.6 per cent in the European elections in June 1994, and to no less than 15.4 per cent in the parliamentary (and European) elections in June 1999. In the Netherlands, however, electoral support for the 'Centrumstroming' has been marginal during the same period, fluctuating between 0.5 per cent in the elections to the Lower House (*Tweede Kamer*) in 1986 and 2.9 per cent in similar elections in 1994 (van Donselaar 1997b: 40). At the parliamentary elections of May 1998, however, this percentage fell to 0.6 per cent, and decreased further to 0.5 per cent in the European elections in 1999 (Mudde and van Holsteyn 2000: 158).

In this article, we will seek to establish the underlying factors that may explain this remarkable difference in the electoral attractiveness of extreme right-wing parties between Flanders and the Netherlands. In order to provide an explanation for this difference, these factors must meet two conditions. First of all, they must be able to explain the electoral growth of right-wing extremism. Second, Flanders and the Netherlands must differ as far as these factors are concerned. We will argue that the differential success of the two political movements involves both demand and supply factors. Demand refers to the presence in a society of people who want to participate in activities to further a specific cause, and supply refers to the existence in a society of organisations that offer opportunities for such activity. However, without mobilisation processes that bring supply and demand together, nothing would happen. Thus, demand, supply and mobilisation are the three key elements of our conceptual framework. Note that the term 'participation' refers not only to active participation (e.g. active participation in a demonstration), but also to voting behaviour, the core 'dependent variable' in this article.

We will now elaborate upon the three key elements of our conceptual framework, namely demand, supply and mobilisation. The success of a socio-political movement always involves two components: individuals who want to participate and organisations that offer opportunities to participate. Applying a socioeconomic metaphor, these two elements have been labelled 'demand' and 'supply' (Klandermans 1997, Klandermans and Mayer 1999; Loch 1999; Oegema 1993). The demand-side of participation covers the grievances, the perceptions of deprivation and injustice, the group identification and ideologies that spur people on to take part in the activities of an organised movement. The supply-side of participation encompasses the qualities of the organisations, the leadership, the political opportunities and the various action forms that characterise a socio-political movement. Both the supply and the demand sides have their own history: the history of movement organisations as far as supply is concerned (Klandermans and Mayer 1999; Taylor 1989), and the life histories of

individual participants as far as demand is concerned (Klandermans and Mayer 1999).

In relation to a movement's history, it is the case that movements in abeyance play an important role. Verta Taylor has pointed to the fact that movements do not disappear, but that 'abeyance structures' develop when a society provides marginal or dissident groups with insufficient space (Taylor 1989). She suggests that committed activists become isolated if a movement loses support. They, then, establish alternative structures that make it possible to continue to cherish the old ideals. A movement in abeyance consists of groups of activists who have found a niche for themselves and who thus maintain activist networks, repertoires, goals and tactics as well as a collective identity. These abeyance structures, according to Taylor, promote the continuance of the movement and are important in later periods of mobilisation.

Processes of socialisation are crucial in the individuals' life histories. Political socialisation plays a crucial role in the development of an individual's readiness to engage with a given political current. Parents, peers, school and other actors in a person's immediate environment serve to generate the potentiality for involvement in a political organisation (Andrews 1991).

Potential participation does not automatically become actual, however. Mobilisation processes serve to bring supply and demand together. Mobilisation campaigns make political organisations and their objectives known to individuals. Mobilisation campaigns are the political equivalent of commercial advertisements, they serve to advertise the organisation and its goals and to stimulate potential participants to become actively involved in the organisation.

Supply, demand, and mobilisation are the three basic elements of any theory of participation, regardless of whether it concerns voting for a party associated with a movement or taking part in a demonstration. Each element requires its own theoretical framework. Grievance theory accounts for the demand-side of participation. In its more elaborated version, grievance theory accounts for the generation of collective action frames in a population. Essentially, a collective action frame encompasses the belief that a group someone identifies with is treated unjustly and that collective action can help to redress the injustice (Gamson 1992; Snow and Benford 1988). Individuals who adhere to a collective action frame are potential participants. Adherence to a collective action frame is the result of sometimes protracted socialisation processes. Together the adherents of a collective action frame can be referred to as a movement's mobilisation potential (Klandermans 1997). For a mobilisation potential to be transformed into actual participants, it is necessary to have a supply of attractive opportunities to participate and effective mobilisation strategies. Resource mobilisation and political process theory account for this part of the process (Klandermans 1997; Tarrow 1998).

These dynamics work to make strong organisations stronger and to keep weak organisations weak. Viable organisations are more likely to offer attractive opportunities than weak organisations, as they command more resources and have more impact. Viable organisations are also more likely to have effective mobilising structures. Therefore, the former are more likely to attract participants than the latter. As a consequence, the viable organisations become stronger, and the weak organisations remain weak (Klandermans 1998). The result is an upward spiral for the viable organisations and stagnation or sometimes even a downward spiral for the weak organisations.

## Supply: opportunities for participation

The term 'supply' thus refers to the existence in a society of organisations that offer opportunities to participate in action to further a cause. Both the organisations and the activities can be more or less appealing to an individual citizen. For decades, the extreme right has been more strongly organised in Flanders than in the Netherlands. There are two main reasons for this. First of all, the extreme right in Flanders has almost always been present as an undercurrent within a wider social movement (the 'Flemish movement'), as a result of which this movement has succeeded in developing a structure. This 'organised nationalistic subculture' (Mudde and van Holsteyn 2000) in time enabled a well-organised party to emerge. Such a sub-culture is virtually non-existent in the Netherlands, which has hindered the development of an extreme right-wing party. Second, the Dutch government has taken a harder line against the extreme right in the Netherlands than has been the case in Flanders (van Donselaar 1995). This also served to obstruct the development of a Dutch extreme right-wing party.

### *Organisational strength*

The significance of the Flemish movement and its aims have not always been correctly understood outside Belgium. This movement is frequently reduced to Flemish nationalism, which is in turn equated with right-wing extremism. A good understanding of this Flemish movement must therefore start with a definition of its components (Spruyt 1995: 33–5). The Flemish movement is a broad and pluralistic emancipation movement covering the economic, political, social and cultural domains and representing virtually all the social and political trends in Flemish society. Flemish nationalism is a political stream within the Flemish movement, which seeks to promote the interests of the Flemish people in the political domain. This political defence of interests can be expressed in various ways. Some people defend a federal state structure within a Belgian state, while others seek to achieve independence for Flanders (separatism) and the dissolution of Belgium. Radical right-wing Flemish nationalism is a stream within this Flemish nationalism, where an extreme right-wing view of the world is linked to ethnic nationalism and to the rejection of Belgium as a nation state.

In order to understand the role and significance of the extreme right-wing in Flemish society, a brief sketch of the history of nationalism in Belgium and Flanders is in order (for a good summary, see Vos 1994). Belgian independence in 1830 led to the emergence of the Flemish movement. As a reaction to the 'Frenchification' of the Belgian state, it was essentially a linguistic movement, and sought to achieve official recognition and equal rights for the Dutch language. Around the time of the turn of the century this movement developed into a wider nationalistic movement, aiming to promote the development of the Flemish people, for example in cultural and economic terms. After the First World War, cultural nationalism for the first time took the form of a political movement, which (also for the first time) took an anti-Belgian position. Between the two world wars this anti-Belgian position led to the rejection of parliamentary democracy, which was regarded as 'Belgian'. Flemish nationalism evolved in an extreme right-wing direction, and its proponents further extended their anti-Belgian ideology with elements of 'New Order' thinking. This development

led to the collaboration of the then radical Flemish national party (the VNV: 'Vlaams Nationaal Verbond' — Flemish National Union) with the German occupation during the Second World War, partly because they took a similar ideological line. This collaboration with the German occupation largely discredited both the Flemish movement and Flemish nationalism after the Second World War. Soon after the war the radical (anti-Belgian) form of Flemish nationalism largely vanished from the political scene, while memories of collaboration paralysed Flemish-oriented initiatives for many years. This led to a revival of cultural nationalism during the years after the Second World War, with an emphasis on the language struggle in Flanders and the development of Flemish culture. The political party 'Volksunie' (People's Union), which was founded in 1954, largely owed its electoral success during the 1960s to this flourishing cultural nationalism. Although the profile of this party was partly ambiguous at first (see below), it finally emerged as a democratic and, in time, even as a progressive party.

Radical extreme right-wing Flemish nationalism did not, however, disappear completely from the political forum after the Second World War. It 'lay in abeyance' for several decades on the fringes of the Flemish movement. There are various reasons for this. First of all, during the period between the two world wars, Catholicism, which was dominant in Flanders, became closely interwoven with the Flemish movement (see also Vos 1992 and 1993). After the Second World War, a large proportion of the mainly Catholic-oriented individuals within the Flemish movement condemned the collaboration with the Germans. However, the process of interweaving that had taken place between the Flemish movement and Catholics was such that many members of the Catholic public themselves had a sense of solidarity with the collaborators. A few significant post-war conflicts (the so-called 'royal question' and the 'school struggle'), in which the opposition between Flemish/Catholic and Walloon/non-Catholic was sharpened, further reinforced the bond between Catholicism and Flemish nationalism. This link with Catholicism made Flemish nationalism, and at the same time also its more radical variant, less socially vulnerable. This was one factor that facilitated the political resurrection of this form of nationalism. The ambiguous attitude of the Volksunie towards the collaboration (as well as including former collaborators among its officials, the party also sought to gain amnesty for those who collaborated with the German occupation) also contributed to the continuation of the fascist tradition within Flemish nationalism (Vos 1994: 149). Finally, this radical stream also actively tried to rehabilitate itself within the Flemish movement. This took place through a selective view of history, in which 'wrong' behaviour during the Second World War was ignored, whereas the motives behind the collaboration with the occupation were placed in an idealistic context (Reynebeau 1989: 113–23; Seberechts 1992). In this way the collaboration was redefined as an aspect of the Flemish struggle for independence (Brinckman and De Wever 1997: 88–9). The result of all this was that extreme right-wing Flemish nationalists were re-admitted to the wider Flemish movement.

Until the 1980s their position within this movement was, however, a marginal one, and it was certainly not undisputed. This radical movement, however, slowly but surely took root (again) in Flemish society. This happened very gradually and – certainly at the beginning – on a modest scale (see among others De Sutter 1997; Seberechts 1992; Vos 1993). Soon after the Second World War

youth associations were founded for the children of families hit by the 'repression' exercised against those involved in collaboration. Various anti-repression journals were founded, such as 'Rommelpot' and 't Pallieterke'. In 1951 the 'Verbond van Vlaamse Oud-Oostfrontstrijders' (Association of Flemish Eastern Front Veterans) was founded, an organisation of individuals who joined the Germans in fighting communist Russia during the Second World War (Brinckman and De Wever 1997: 88–92). From this association other groupings of Eastern Front veterans and collaborators gradually splintered off. These associations initially sought to alleviate the material needs of collaborators, but eventually they began to seek the political and ideological rehabilitation of their activities during the German occupation. During the 1960s and 1970s a network developed in their wake which brought together various militant organisations, such as the fascistic militia 'VMO' ('Vlaamse Militanten Orde' – Flemish Militant Order), the intellectual organisation 'Were Di' and the action group 'Voorpost' (Front Post), which together had a membership of several hundred militants (Verlinden 1981 and 1991). Noticeable here is the concentration of this group of militants in the city and region of Antwerp, which had long been an important historical base of support for radical Flemish nationalism (Vos 1994: 129–30).

These associations formed the structural framework from which, in time, the party 'Vlaams Blok' was to grow (compare Spruyt 1995). The Vlaams Blok did not, thus, emerge from a vacuum, but was able to build on an existing network of individuals who were active on the radical fringe of the Flemish movement. The militants needed to engage in party activities were available, and they had already been active in the political struggle. These militant groups were also ideologically well trained, which facilitated the development of a coherent party. This is illustrated by Gijssels' finding that a majority of Vlaams Blok representatives elected in 1991 had previously been active in organisations such as the VMO, Voorpost or Were Di (Gijssels 1992: 243–73). These ideologically-trained activists made it possible to extend the party structures further. Another factor facilitating this development was the highly-organised and tightly-led and centralised character of the Vlaams Blok as a party (Spruyt 1995: 54–5). Decisions are made by a restricted party executive committee. The members of this committee are not elected, but appointed by the resigning party committee. The chairperson of the party, too, is appointed rather than elected.

The situation in the Netherlands is fundamentally different. In contrast to the situation in Flanders, in the Netherlands extreme right-wing organisations have never succeeded in linking their efforts to those of a wider social or political movement. Fascism and Nazism have always been marginal in the Netherlands. In the 1930s the National Socialist Movement (NSB) was generally rejected by most citizens and came close to being outlawed. Due to its collaboration with the Germans during the war, the party and its ideology became completely taboo. As a consequence, in the post-war era any reference to Nazism or Fascism was and still is enough for an organisation or group to be banned. Nevertheless, attempts to re-establish fascist organisations could be observed already within a few years after the war (see e.g. van Donselaar 1991; Husbands 1992; Lucardie 1998; Mudde and van Holsteyn 2000). Initially, none of these initiatives were successful. The first attempt to establish a party failed when the 'National European Social Movement', which had been formed by the 'Association of Former Political Delinquents', was banned in 1955. From then on, kindred 'neutral' parties became the home of politically-oriented individuals with fascist



sympathies: first, the 'Boerenpartij' (Farmers' Party) and later on, the parties within the so-called 'Centrumstroming'. As it is impossible in the Netherlands to be openly fascist or nazist as a political party, conflicts between radicals and moderates about the image that is shown 'front stage' and the ideas that are nurtured 'back stage' continue to plague these parties (van Donselaar 1991). History appears to repeat itself periodically, with an influx of people with fascist and nazist sympathies 'spoiling the identity' of the party. Conflicts between the more radical members, who tend to move the party into fascist or nazist directions, and the more moderate members, who want to establish a 'respectable' extreme right-wing party, repeatedly lead to groups splintering off.

One of those groups is the 'Centrumpartij' (CP), the originator of the 'Centrumstroming'. In 1979/80 the CP splintered off from the 'Nederlandse Volks-Unie' (NVU) as a moderate break-away party. The NVU (Netherlands Ethnic Union) was openly racist and national-socialist and had clear links to previous, sometimes pre-war fascist and racist organisations in the Netherlands (van Donselaar 1991). So obvious were these features that attempts to outlaw the party towards the end of the 1970s almost succeeded. Despite its effort to distance itself from the NVU and its ideology, the 'Centrumstroming' never fully succeeded in dissociating itself from these racist and fascist roots. Radical and moderate currents continued to fight within the party. The 20-year history of the 'Centrumstroming' reads as a ongoing chain of internal conflicts, splits and fights over the policy and leadership of the party (van Holsteyn and Mudde 1998). As a result of one of those fights between moderates and radicals, in 1984 moderates splintered off and established the 'Centrumdemocraten', which meant the disintegration of the CP. The party was to surface again as CP'86. Initially, CP'86 was not very successful, but with the influx of more radical members of the former youth organisations of the NVU, it gained some momentum. However, in 1995 the Amsterdam court sentenced the party for being a criminal organisation engaged in propagating racial discrimination and hatred. Once again moderate members left and founded yet another party.

More successful were the 'Centrumdemocraten' ('centre democrats' or CD). The party grew both in terms of membership and in terms of electorate. No less than 78 seats were acquired in city council elections in 1994 and the CD won three seats in the parliament after the national elections in the same year. Soon, however, the party became a victim of its success. As it had to fill an unexpected number of seats, it was less selective than it should have been in appointing representatives. Many representatives turned out to be failures, others appeared to be engaged in criminal behaviour. Moreover, undercover journalists published articles that were extremely harmful to the party, as it turned out to be much less civilised behind the scenes than it pretended to be (see e.g. Rensen 1994). Once again the party dissolved into internal conflicts, but this time also because of the personality of the party leader, Janmaat. Although Janmaat tried to organise his party as tightly, and with as much central control, as his Belgian counterparts, he lacked the charisma needed to do so in an effective and convincing way. He was unable to prevent conflicts and to pacify the party. On the contrary, he himself became a source of conflict, as he increasingly appeared to run the party along the lines of a family enterprise (van Holsteyn and Mudde 1998). All these scandals and conflicts meant that the 1998-elections were an outright disaster. The party lost its seats in the parliament and all but two of the 78 seats in the city councils.

The history of the extreme right in the Netherlands boasts little glory. The fights between moderates and radicals have led to split after split. Too much time and energy was spent on infighting and too little on strengthening the party as an organisation. It was further the case that even the most tenuous link to ideologies such as racism or fascism turned out to be disastrous. While tensions between Flemings and Walloons sharpened the Flemish national consciousness in Belgium, there was no such conflict in the Netherlands (Mudde and van Holsteyn 2000). The absence of a more 'neutral' ideological framework such as Flemish nationalism in Flanders left the movement in the Netherlands with little more than xenophobia as a unifying principle. To go down this road would have been a risky gamble, and one that could easily lead to court cases on the grounds of alleged racism or accusations of appeals for discrimination. The extreme right in the Netherlands clearly never overcame this organisational weakness. The lively network of associations, organisations and parties that were able to develop in Flanders, and that allowed a strong party structure to develop, is missing in the Netherlands. This difference with Flanders is well illustrated by an inventory of radical right-wing organisations in the mid-1980s (Ó Maoláin 1987: 23–34 and 198–202). This inventory identified approximately 20 active organisations in Flanders, as compared to only six in the Netherlands. Ten years later the situation had barely changed in the Netherlands (van Donselaar 1997b), whereas in Flanders the extreme right continues to flourish (De Witte and Scheepers 1997; Poirrier 1999).

### *The governmental approach*

We have so far examined primarily the 'internal' dynamics of an extreme right-wing party: the way in which it can structure itself by building on 'abeyance' structures and networks. Another significant factor is of course the way in which the 'outside world' reacts to such parties. Here we will limit ourselves to the way in which the respective governments have reacted to extreme right-wing parties in Flanders and the Netherlands. This part has been based on the international comparative research carried out by van Donselaar (1995 and 1997a).

In his research, van Donselaar provides an inventory and evaluation of the way in which the state combats the extreme-right in five West European countries. Here, we will only consider Belgium (Flanders) and the Netherlands. Van Donselaar covers both repressive measures (legal prohibitions and their application in relation to racist propaganda, extreme right-wing demonstrations and extreme right-wing violence) and barriers in the political system (such as the electoral system and the use of a *cordon sanitaire*). He observed that the government takes a less strict line in Belgium than in the Netherlands.

This difference in government reaction relates primarily to the degree of repression. As regards the available legal means, Belgium is not only less well equipped than the Netherlands, but the available tools are also used less effectively. Hence the existing anti-racism law in Belgium has not played a significant part in the prevention of racist propaganda by the Vlaams Blok. In the Netherlands, on the other hand, party officials of the CD were condemned by a court in 1994 for incitement to racial hatred. The prohibition of extreme right-wing demonstrations is quite rare in Belgium, while it is the rule rather than the exception in the Netherlands. According to van Donselaar, racist

violence is more strongly interwoven with extreme right-wing parties in Belgium (i.e. the Vlaams Blok) than in the Netherlands, where the link is rather indirect. Finally, it is not possible to prohibit a party in Belgium, or to punish the continuation of a party rooted in the pre-war or wartime extreme right. In the Netherlands, a party can be prohibited, and the *Besluit Ontbinding Landverraderlijke Organisaties* (Decree on the Dissolution of Treasonable Organisations) provides for the dissolution of organisations wishing to continue the efforts of the pre-war NSB (Nationaal Socialistische Beweging der Nederlanden). In 1978 the former 'Nederlandse Volks-Unie' (NVU) was even found by a court to be an illegal association, although it was not dissolved.

The differences between the Netherlands and Belgium in terms of barriers are less pronounced. In fact the electoral system in the Netherlands is more accessible to an extreme right-wing party than in Belgium, so this factor cannot account for the greater electoral support for the extreme right in Belgium. The political isolation of the extreme right is ensured quite consistently in the Netherlands by means of a *cordon sanitaire*, i.e. other organisations do not enter into coalitions or agreements with extreme-right organisations. While similar provisions formally apply in Belgium too, in practice the *cordon sanitaire* is prone to a certain number of fissures.

We can therefore conclude from van Donselaar's study that the extreme right has enjoyed greater freedom of movement in Belgium (Flanders) than in the Netherlands. This is, of course, related to the position of such parties in Flanders, as shown above. When an extreme right-wing party is entrenched within a wider, respectable social and political stream, it is more difficult for the government to hinder its development. A party like the Vlaams Blok has also made full use of this greater freedom of movement. Van Donselaar argues that the less repressive governmental approach in Belgium has contributed to the greater organisational strength of the Vlaams Blok as a party. He refers to what he calls the 'adjustment dilemma'. Extreme right-wing parties have to find a balance between presenting their (radical) ideology and acquiring social respectability by 'adjusting' to contemporary society (see also van Donselaar 1991). Excessive adjustment, however, entails a denial of the ideological principles. The radical wing then threatens to leave the party, leaving its effectiveness considerably weakened. The heavier the (governmental) pressure on extreme right-wing parties, the greater the need to adjust. This undermines the organisational stability of these parties, since they have to invest considerable amounts of energy in reconciling their radical and more moderate supporters. This situation is typical of the Netherlands, and accounts for the internal quarrels and successive splits within the Dutch extreme right since the Second World War. In Belgium the (governmental) pressure on an extreme right-wing party is less intense, so there is less of a need to invest energy in such a balancing exercise. The organisational stability of such a party is therefore greater, and more can be invested in the electoral development of the party and in recruiting and strengthening its activists.

## **Demand: the role of 'everyday' racism and political dissatisfaction**

As indicated above, Flemish nationalism, and in particular its more radical variant, has been a crucial factor in the emergence and development of the Vlaams Blok party in Flanders. In studies in the Netherlands, this finding is

sometimes extrapolated to include the voters who support this party (see, for example, Elbers and Fennema 1993: 80–95). Flemish nationalism is then regarded as the principal motive for a vote for the Vlaams Blok. According to this line of reasoning, the greater measure of nationalism in the Flemish population relative to that of the Netherlands (see e.g. Billiet et al. 1996), provides the explanation for the higher percentage of extreme right-wing voters in Flanders. It would further follow that the absence of nationalism in the Netherlands would explain the poor electoral results of the Centrumstrooming.

The supposition that the voting behaviour of Vlaams Blok-voters is determined by Flemish nationalism, is not, however, confirmed by electoral research. At the national elections in 1991, only 4 per cent of Vlaams Blok voters referred to Flemish nationalism or to the Flemish-Walloon division as reasons for their vote (Billiet et al. 1993: 234). In the national elections in 1995 this percentage was 5.4 per cent (Swyngedouw and Beerten 1996: 572–3). The underlying reasons for voting behaviour in the 1989 and 1991 elections were investigated in two electoral studies that used multivariate methods (Billiet and De Witte 1995; De Witte 1992). Both studies enable a comparison of the determinants of a vote for the Vlaams Blok with those of a vote for the (equally Flemish nationalist) Volksunie. Both studies show that on both occasions Flemish nationalism-oriented voters voted for the Volksunie rather than for the Vlaams Blok. The analysis of the results of an open-ended question on the motives for voting in 1995 again confirm this observation (Swyngedouw and Beerten 1996: 572–3). These results are remarkable, since the Flemish nationalist programme of the Vlaams Blok is much more radical than that of the Volksunie. When viewed alongside the history of the Vlaams Blok (see above) this finding suggests that Flemish nationalism is crucial to an understanding of the emergence, and nature, of the Vlaams Blok as a party, but virtually irrelevant as an explanation for the attraction of this party to Flemish voters.

So why do voters in Flanders vote for the Vlaams Blok? Following van Holsteyn (1990) it is possible to propose two competing hypotheses. The first is that the choice of voting for an extreme right-wing party is based on substantive considerations: the voter knows the position of such a party and expresses his or her preference for the content of (one of) these ideas ('issue voting' or 'rational choice voting'). In the second hypothesis, the choice of such a party is seen as an expression of protest and of the rejection of politics: the choice is not made for the party in question, but against all the other parties. The rejection of the political process is therefore a central element in this hypothesis.

Research into elections in Flanders between 1989 and 1995 primarily offers support for the first hypothesis (Billiet 1998; Billiet and De Witte 1995; Billiet et al. 1993; De Witte 1992; Swyngedouw and Beerten 1996; Swyngedouw et al. 1998). The choice of the Vlaams Blok is principally determined by a negative attitude towards immigrants. These newcomers are accused of competing with the Flemish population in the economic domain (e.g. for scarce jobs, housing and social security), while their lifestyle is perceived as being too different in the cultural domain. These attitudes can be labelled 'everyday' racism (see e.g. De Witte 1999) and are in line with the anti-immigrant programme of the Vlaams Blok, and these voters therefore express agreement with this central party position. In addition to this anti-immigrant motive, a minority of voters also express a political protest motive. They show their disappointment with the political process, or cast an explicit 'anti-political' vote. This is equally in line

with the political message of the Vlaams Blok, since this party also presents itself in elections as an 'anti-system party' (De Witte and Scheepers 1997). The relative proportions of the two types of motives is interesting. In 1991 approximately 50 per cent of Vlaams Blok voters referred to the issue of immigrants in their reply to an open-ended question, and about 13 per cent referred to 'political protest' (Billiet et al. 1993: 234). A similar question in 1995 indicated that around 33 per cent of the Vlaams Blok voters referred to 'immigrants', while approximately 14 per cent referred to 'anti-political' reasons (Swyngedouw and Beerten 1996: 572–3). In both elections the anti-immigrant motive therefore played a more important role than the anti-political motive.

Due to the limited percentage of right-wing voters in the Netherlands, there is little research available that weighs up different motives for voting for the Centrumstrooming. The little research that does exist on the attitudes and motives of extreme right-wing voters in the Netherlands, however, seems to indicate that the motives and their proportion are similar to those in Flanders (De Witte and Scheepers 1996; Mudde and van Holsteyn 2000). CD voters also express a combination of negative attitudes towards immigrants and an undertone of political dissatisfaction. The former is more dominant than the latter. This suggests that the choice of an extreme right-wing party is based on fairly similar reasons in both countries. Both recent research within the Netherlands (Tillie and Fennema 1998) and comparative European studies (van der Brug et al. 2000) largely confirm this thesis.

A negative attitude towards immigrants and (to a lesser extent) feelings of political dissatisfaction, therefore seem to be the principal motives underlying a vote for an extreme right-wing party in either country.<sup>1</sup> There is, however, a considerable difference in the level of these variables in respectively Flanders and the Netherlands. First of all, the level of negative attitudes towards immigrants is higher in Belgium (and Flanders) than in the Netherlands. Dekker and van Praag (1990b) analysed the data from the 1989 Eurobarometer survey on attitudes towards immigrants. Ten items about ethnic minorities were combined into a xenophobia scale. In the Netherlands an average of 30 per cent of the respondents agreed with this scale. In Belgium the percentage was 56 per cent. In comparison with Dutch people, Belgians felt more strongly that people of other nationalities abused social security, and held the same group responsible for the increase in unemployment, crime and feelings of insecurity. The support for an integration policy towards ethnic minorities was also more limited in Belgium than in the Netherlands (Dekker and van Praag 1990a: 25). More complex analyses of the same data reaffirmed that the number of respondents who are negative about immigrants is larger in Belgium than in the Netherlands (Dekker and van Praag 1990a: 37–8; Eurobarometer 1989: 90–4). The respondents in the Eurobarometer report were divided into five homogeneous groups with regard to their attitude towards ethnic minorities (and democracy). The two groups with a positive attitude towards ethnic minorities together account for 60 per cent of the Dutch respondents, as compared to only 40 per cent in Belgium. In Belgium the group with a negative attitude is twice as large as that in the Netherlands: 23 per cent as compared to 11 per cent. These findings are not limited to this specific survey. The results from, for example, the European Values Study show similar differences. Belgians, in comparison with Dutch people, are less accepting of Moslems or immigrants as neighbours, while Dutch people are more prepared than Belgians to grant equal rights to both ethnic minorities and natives (Ashford and Timms 1992: 13–14 and 24–5). The results

of the 1997 Eurobarometer survey again show Belgians to be more 'racist' than respondents from the Netherlands (European Commission 1998), even though the methodology involved in these findings does warrant some criticism (see Cambré et al., in press).

As regards the attitude towards politics, the two countries reveal a similar pattern. The European Values Study reveals that the level of interest in politics is noticeably lower in Belgium than in the Netherlands (Ashford and Timms 1992: 86–107). In the Netherlands, 62 per cent of those interviewed were very (14 per cent) or quite (48 per cent) interested in politics. In Belgium the total was only 29 per cent (7 per cent were 'very' and 22 per cent 'quite' interested). The same study in 1990 showed that confidence in the parliament is somewhat lower in Belgium than in the Netherlands (42 per cent in Belgium against 53 per cent in the Netherlands), while Belgians feel more powerless in terms of reacting against a government decision that was perceived to be wrong. Dekker (1991) analysed two Eurobarometer datasets and came to the same conclusions. He found that Dutch people are significantly more satisfied than Belgians with the way their democracy works, while they also demonstrate stronger political involvement and greater interest in politics. The Belgians score significantly higher on feelings of social powerlessness.

The findings discussed above all relate to Belgium rather than Flanders. This does not, however, undermine the conclusion that there is a difference between Flanders and the Netherlands in terms of the level of interest in extreme right-wing activities. A comparison between Flanders and Wallonia with regard to attitudes towards immigrants does not reveal a difference between the two parts of the country (Billiet et al. 1990; Dekker and van Praag 1990b: 54) or even suggest a somewhat more negative attitude in Flanders (Delooz and Kerkhofs 1992: 239). In relation to politics, the European Values Study show the Flemish to feel more powerless than do the Walloons, although this difference is rather small (Delooz and Kerkhofs 1992: 248). Research in which Flemish respondents are compared with Dutch people with regard to their attitude towards immigrants likewise confirms the difference in level outlined above (Billiet et al. 1996; Raaijmakers and De Witte 1995).

We can therefore conclude that the demand for participation in extreme right-wing activities is higher in Flanders than in the Netherlands. Voting for an extreme right-wing party is one such activity and the 'reservoir' of potential voters for an extreme right-wing party would appear to be larger in Flanders than in the Netherlands. The higher levels of negative attitudes towards immigrants and political dissatisfaction in Flanders are contributing factors.

It is not easy to account for this difference between the two countries, but we can venture some speculation. A first possible explanation is suggested by Billiet et al. (1992: 313) who explain the more negative attitude towards foreigners in Flanders by referring to the difference in the minorities policies pursued in the respective countries. In the Netherlands a government policy to combat disadvantage and discrimination against ethnic minorities has existed for a lot longer than has been the case in Flanders.

Second, the discourse of Flemish nationalism may have played a role, albeit an indirect one. Even the more moderate Flemish nationalists (such as the Volksunie) are 'ethnic nationalists' rather than 'state nationalists'. This implies that one can only belong to the 'ethnic community' if one speaks the Flemish language and/or if one has Flemish parents. Such an 'exclusive' nationalism

emphasises the particularities of the ethnic group. This by definition excludes other ethnic groups and therefore implies an ethnocentric position (Vos 1993: 148–9 and 1994: 147–50). As pointed out above, a rejection of Belgium has emerged within the overall framework of Flemish nationalism, and this has in time also led to the rejection of Belgian institutions (including the parliament) (Vos 1994). The discourse of these organisations therefore also includes an anti-political undertone.

## **Mobilisation: ‘upward spirals’ versus ‘treadmills’**

Thus, right-wing extremism is stronger in Flanders than in the Netherlands in terms of both demand and supply. However, mobilisation processes are needed to bring the two together (Klandermans 1997). Potential voters and political parties are no exceptions to that rule. In order to appeal to these potential voters, considerable efforts need to be made to recruit and convince voters. Voters do not vote for a party until they are informed about the existence of the party and its aims, and are persuaded that this party is both seeking to fulfil their goals and is capable of doing so. What is more, voters have attitudes concerning a much larger number of issues than those that are relevant to the choice of voting for an extreme right-wing party. Militants of an extreme right-wing party must therefore try to make ‘their’ issues politically relevant, so that people will vote for their party. This is where demand and supply coincide: existing structures and networks make it possible to appeal to and convince potential voters. As both demand and supply are stronger in Flanders than in the Netherlands, mobilisation can easily result in an ‘upward spiral’ of support in Flanders.

The existence of a structured network of radical Flemish nationalists and organisations has enabled the Vlaams Blok gradually to develop as an electoral force. This is clearly illustrated by the electoral growth of this party in the various regions of Flanders. It was in Antwerp, the birthplace of radical Flemish nationalism, that the Vlaams Blok gained its first electoral successes. While this party obtained only 1.8 per cent of Flemish votes at the parliamentary elections in 1981, it already had 4.7 per cent of the vote in the ‘canton’ (the smallest electoral subdivision) of Antwerp (De Witte and Scheepers 1997). During the 1980s the Vlaams Blok continued to grow in Antwerp election after election, while its electoral breakthrough in the rest of Flanders did not come until 1991. Hence, in the 1987 parliamentary elections, 3 per cent of the Flemish voted for the Vlaams Blok, while the figure had already reached 10.1 per cent in the canton of Antwerp. At the European elections two years later, these percentages were 6.6 per cent and 20.6 per cent respectively. The growth of the Vlaams Blok in Antwerp therefore preceded the growth of this party in Flanders.

This rapid growth in the Antwerp region is difficult to explain as a product solely of (resentment due to) the presence of immigrants. The percentage of immigrants is considerably higher in Brussels and Wallonia than in Flanders, while within Flanders this percentage is higher, for example, in Ghent than in Antwerp (De Witte and Verbeeck 2000). An analysis of the results of the elections in Antwerp at neighbourhood level demonstrated that especially an increased concentration of underprivileged people coincides with greater electoral support for the Vlaams Blok (Swyngedouw 1990). Research in both Flanders (Billiet et al. 1990) and the Netherlands (Scheepers et al. 1989) shows that deprivation reinforces negative attitudes towards foreigners. In Antwerp, there-

fore, the two ingredients mentioned above have coincided to allow the growth of an extreme right-wing party. The presence of an underprivileged community reinforced the demand for an extreme right-wing party (the negative attitude towards ethnic minorities). Through an intensive neighbourhood-by-neighbourhood campaign this factor was exploited electorally, since there was a well-structured radical core of militants who could carry out these local neighbourhood activities ('supply').

Since 1988, support for the Vlaams Blok has spread throughout Flanders (De Witte and Scheepers 1997). In 1988 an increase in electoral support was noted for the first time in the triangle between the major cities of Antwerp, Ghent and Brussels. In 1991 it was possible to distinguish three areas: the Antwerp region (about 25 per cent of all votes), the Antwerp–Ghent–Brussels triangle (between 10 and 25 per cent) and – for the first time – the rest of Flanders, with percentages of about 5 per cent. The results of subsequent elections reveal a continuing spread of support for the Vlaams Blok throughout the rest of Flanders, with the most progress being achieved in the Limburg region. The only regions where the Vlaams Blok still achieves poor results are Flemish Brabant and West Flanders. It is noticeable that the gradual spread of the Vlaams Blok electorate in Flanders has always gone hand in hand with the continued structural implantation of the Vlaams Blok in the same regions. Supply and demand mutually reinforced each other, although there are indications that the structural implantation preceded the electoral breakthrough. After its election victory in 1991, the Vlaams Blok announced that it would concentrate mainly on developing its party structure in the province of Limburg. By the following election, these efforts had been successful, and the percentage of votes for the Vlaams Blok in this region increased for the first time.

The electoral growth of the Vlaams Blok therefore suggests that an upward spiral took place. The presence of a structured network of ideologically-trained activists makes it increasingly possible to appeal to and convince an electorate. The electoral growth that results from this makes it possible to reinforce the party structures (among other things by means of the government subsidies for each elected candidate). These stronger party structures in turn enhance campaigning opportunities, thus increasing the scope of action open to the party and making it possible to develop its structures further. This in turn enhances the opportunities to recruit both militants and voters and to put the party's own issues on the political agenda. The latter is facilitated by the greater media access which a medium-sized party almost automatically acquires. The access to various policy and investigative commissions that is available to elected officials (see e.g. the 'Dutroux commission', on which Vlaams Blok MP Annemans had a seat) increases the access to the media of such a party, while Vlaams Blok elected officials are also able, through these activities, to 'normalise' their party's image and make it acceptable.

The growth process that leads to this upward spiral is, however, a long and laborious one. This is well illustrated by the history of the Vlaams Blok (Spruyt 1995: 43–65). The Vlaams Blok has been a voluntary organisation for quite a long time. It was not until 1988, 11 years after its foundation, that the party began to extend its structures and to generally adopt a more professional attitude. It was mid-1990s before the party had an extensive network of local departments and regional secretariats in almost every region of Flanders. Since then the extended National Secretariat in Brussels has further acquired a large number of support



departments, such as a legal section, a research grouping, a training institute and a broadcasting foundation.

It was argued above that the interaction of supply and demand can lead to the emergence of an 'upward spiral'. The precise moment at which this process emerges, and the reason why it takes place at that time rather than any other, remain open to debate. In Flanders the 'spark' which brought the two together may have been the arrival of a new and well-trained generation of young activists in the party (De Sutter 1997: 72). This new generation, that among others includes Philip Dewinter, is inspired by the 'New Right' (*'la nouvelle droite'*) and took its lead from the success of the French Front National and elaborated a populist strategy for the Vlaams Blok, in which a hard anti-immigrant position was presented in a mediagenic way. This was not a new position (see Spruyt 1995), but it became more central in the campaign strategy than it had been before.

In the Netherlands, on the other hand, the situation of the extreme right illustrates how difficult it is to set into motion such a spiral from a position of weakness. Even if one takes into account a lesser demand, obviously the problem in the Netherlands for the extreme right is the lack of a supply of individuals to whom such activism appeals. In the absence of strong organisations and networks it is difficult to mobilise. It is also difficult to persuade potential participants that participation is going to make a difference. The supply-side of participation is too weak to satisfy *any* demand. As a consequence, right-wing extremism in the Netherlands remains caught in a circle of organisational weakness.

## Conclusion

The electoral success of the extreme-right in Flanders has been interpreted as a product of the strong social underpinning that radical Flemish nationalism enjoys in Flanders, where it successfully became an undercurrent within the wider Flemish movement. This development was not least possible because of the less repressive stance of the Belgian government towards this movement. The extreme right was thus able to remain active on the fringes of society. The Vlaams Blok eventually grew out of these abeyance structures, and was able to implement the current networks and recruit militants to win voters. In doing so, it exploited two themes that are central to voting for an extreme right-wing party: a negative attitude towards ethnic minorities and – secondarily – political dissatisfaction. These attitudes are held by more individuals in Flanders than in the Netherlands, so the 'reservoir' from which an extreme right-wing party can draw is thus larger in Flanders. The interplay of supply and demand initiated a spiral movement: the existing structures increased the possibility of appealing to the 'reservoir' of voters, while the electoral growth of the party eventually strengthened the party structures, which in turn enhanced opportunities for recruitment.

The situation in the Netherlands is fundamentally different. The absence of a threat to the national or ethnic identity probably hindered the emergence of a national consciousness. The extreme right in the Netherlands has failed to link its efforts to those of a wider political or social movement. As a result, there was no opportunity to develop an organised sub-culture with a network of individuals and organisations from which a party could eventually grow. The repress-

ive stance of the government in the Netherlands had a negative impact on the organisational stability of extreme right-wing parties in the country, giving rise to internal disputes and periodical schisms. The 'level' of negative attitudes towards foreigners and the level of political dissatisfaction is also lower in the Netherlands, so the 'reservoir' from which an extreme right-wing party is able to draw voters is smaller than in Flanders. The structural deficiencies of the extreme right likewise provide limited opportunities for appealing to this electoral reservoir. As a result, the development of right-wing extremism in the Netherlands is hampered by organisational weakness.

The 'upward spiral movement' in Flanders is not, however, limitless. In the mid-1990s the growth of the Vlaams Blok reached a ceiling: the 12.6 per cent that was achieved at the European elections in 1994 was no longer achieved at the parliamentary elections in 1995, when the party's share of the vote lay between 12.2 per cent and 12.4 per cent. The Vlaams Blok has responded to this stagnation with a strategy of diversification (De Witte and Scheepers 1997). Attempts are being made to attract new voters by placing issues other than immigrants on the political agenda. As a rule more attention has been given to issues of 'security' and 'crime' (which are always linked to the immigrant issue), whereas traditional and (ultra)orthodox Catholic issues such as abortion and the battle against 'the permissive society, sexual promiscuity and moral corruption' are being left to a political newcomer: Alexandra Colen. In its approach to socialist voters (and the labour movement in general) the Vlaams Blok is also trying to broaden its base by trying to take over the issues and symbols of the labour movement (holding 1 May demonstrations since 1996). To this end a social programme – so far rather limited in scope – has been worked out, in which traditional socialist demands such as higher pensions and a fight against unemployment, are linked to radical Flemish nationalist and ethnocentric positions. The electoral growth of the Vlaams Blok between 1994 and 1999 (from about 12 per cent to about 15 per cent) *may* suggest that this party has been successful in broadening the 'demand' for an extreme right-wing party.

Nor is right-wing extremism in the Netherlands necessarily set to remain on a treadmill forever. A more charismatic leader who is able to maintain peace in the organisation may eventually set into motion an upward spiral akin to that witnessed in Flanders.

## Note

- 1 The results of European comparative studies at an aggregate level are in line with these findings (see e.g. Knigge 1998).

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